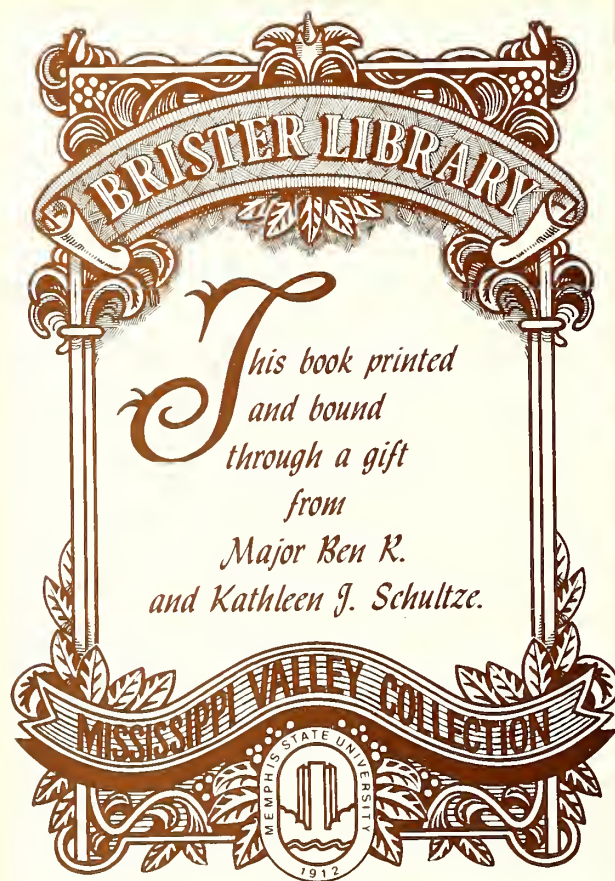


AN ORAL HISTORY OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY IN THE SOUTH
INTERVIEW WITH DR. JULIAN FEIBELMAN

BY - BERKLEY KALIN
ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH OFFICE
MEMPHIS STATE UNIVERSITY



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AN ORAL HISTORY OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY IN THE SOUTH

INTERVIEW WITH JULIAN FEIBELMAN

NOVEMBER 8, 1968

BY BERKLEY KALIN

ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH OFFICE

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I hereby release all right, title, or interest in and to all of my tape-recorded memoirs to the Mississippi Valley Archives of the John Willard Brister Library of Memphis State University and declare that they may be used without any restriction whatsoever and may be copyrighted and published by the said Archives, which also may assign said copyright and publication rights to serious research scholars.

PLACE

Roosevelt Hotel
New Orleans, La.

*with inked in corrections
of the transcript.*

DATE

Nov. 8, 1968

Julian P. Lee Wilson
(Interviewee)

(For the Mississippi Valley Archives
of the John Willard Brister Library
of Memphis State University)

THIS IS A MEMPHIS STATE UNIVERSITY ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH PROJECT DOCUMENTING THE HISTORY OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY IN THE SOUTH. THE DATE IS NOVEMBER 8, 1968. THE INTERVIEWEE IS DR. JULIAN B. FEIBELMAN, WHO IS RABBI-EMERITUS AT TEMPLE SINAI IN NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA. THE INTERVIEW IS TAKING PLACE AT THE ROOSEVELT HOTEL. THE TEMPLE IS LOCATED AT 6227 ST. CHARLES AVENUE. HIS HOME ADDRESS IS 530 WALNUT. DR FEIBELMAN RECEIVED THE TIMES-PICAYUNE AWARD IN 1968 AND THE WEIS AWARD FROM THE NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF CHRISTIANS AND JEWS IN 1968. HE ALSO RECEIVED THE DOMINICAN MEDAL FROM ST. MARY'S COLLEGE, (RUN BY THE DOMINICAN ORDER), FOR HIS ACTIVITIES IN INTER-FAITH WORK.

DR. KALIN: Dr. Feibelman, is there anything else?

DR. FEIBELMAN: Well, this was a rather remarkable year in my life, last year. I became 70 years of age, and my Temple signified that with a banquet which was very gratifying. My college in Jackson, Mississippi, Millsaps College, gave me a citation as one of about 25 Mississippians who graduated from that institution, which I did in 1918, and went immediately into the United States Army at Camp Shelby, where I stayed for fifteen months. This year, also, we had our first grandchild, and that was the crowning event. Now, Dr. Kalin, what else do you want me to talk about?

DR. KALIN: You mentioned that you had something to do with inter-faith activities for some time and have worked closely with Catholics and Protestants.

DR. FEIBELMAN: Throughout the years I have been proud that Temple Sinai was open, always, not only to Negroes who came to services, which they did rather sparsely, but were always welcome--but to meetings and gatherings which were well-established in our Temple which was always integrated. The Family Services Society always met in our Temple for the Institute of ^{Life} which was always an annual affair, and that always brought a very large number of Negroes. When Archbishop Cody was in New Orleans, he began this "Operation Understanding," whereby the churches were open. There were three Sundays designated, and he paid an official visit to Temple Sinai, and we had, on that day, something like about 8,000 Christian visitors who came to Temple Sinai. A large number came to all the other synagogues, too. We all cooperated beautifully, and some of these Protestants and Jews began to take on a new feeling for one another in this city. Since that time--this about 1964, if I remember correctly--the spirit has motivated people, to a large measure, to understand and help one another. I have been invited to Notre Dame Seminary, which is the training college for priests, where they have broken the barriers that existed for years and had a rabbi not only come up to speak to them and ask questions and to talk frankly, but also, the students did visit our Temple for a two-hour period to ask questions about Judaism and be instructed. This is almost common place in New Orleans, today, because of the fine spirit which Archbishop Cody inaugurated. We became such close friends that when he went to Chicago, he invited my wife and myself to his installation as Archbishop of Chicago, and we went. We had a wonderful experience up there, and were actually

DR. FEIBELMAN: humble in that they thought that we had done them such a (con'td.)

great favor by coming. Since then I have had a fine relation with Archbishop Cody, who wrote to me only this summer from Denmark, and since Archbishop Hanna has come here this relationship has been very close, indeed. All of the Archbishops in New Orleans, since I have been here, have occupied our pulpit, spoken in our Temple, and all of our people love them. It seems to me that Archbishop Cody once said that the greatest compliment he ever received was to be invited to speak at Temple Sinai. I would like to mention one other thing that happened with Archbishop ^{Rummel} My wife and I were celebrating our 20th anniversary in and we happened to be in Rome when Pope John was to be crowned. Through the goodness of Bishop O'Connor of the North American College we were given reserved seats on an elevated balcony on the line of the Papal altar. I believe that I am the first rabbi in history to be present at the crowning of a Pope. I don't know what else you want.

DR. KALIN: What about the break-through in race relations when Mr. Bunche came?

DR. FEIBELMAN: Yes, that was a remarkable experience, also, because I believe that was the first time in the South ^{for integrated} an audience of that size--there must have been twenty-five hundred present that night. I can still remember the date, December 14, 1949. It was a miserable, rainy night, and yet we had the Temple upstairs and downstairs filled, we had the auditorium upstairs and downstairs filled, and I think there was about an equal number of both Negro and white present. I spent my time going around keeping people from blocking the exits so that no fire marshall could come in, ^{to condemn the meeting} I was called up at about 7:30

DR. FEIBELMAN: that night to be told that our beautiful stained glass windows (con'td.)

were going to be smashed, but nothing happened, thank God. I also would not allow any policemen to be present, because I said that no policemen had any business around a church when any meeting was going on. Fortunately, the evening turned out to be perfect in all respects. I believe that that helped to break the ice in New Orleans, and I believe, also, that Mr. Bunche's picture in the paper was one of the first ^{Negroes} to be published prominently in New Orleans papers. Of course, Mr. Bunchewas an exceptional man and entitled to all the recognition we could possibly give him. He is the one, of course, that broke down the barriers by coming here and insisting on an integrated audience.

DR. KALIN: Sir, would you mind, for the secretary's sake, spelling the names of Bishop Cody and Hannan. That is C-o-d. . .

DR. FEIBELMAN: C-o-d-y. Hannan, H-a-n-n-a-n.

DR. KALIN: H-a-n-n-a-n. Thank you, sir. Now, your temple has had a tremendous number of outstanding individuals.

DR. FEIBELMAN: Yes, Temple Sinai was begun in 1870, and next year will celebrate its 100th anniversary. It is not the oldest synagogue in New Orleans, but it is the first Reform synagogue in New Orleans. It has been blessed with only five rabbis in all these 100 years. Rabbi Gutheim was the first rabbi. Rabbi Max Heller was the second. Rabbi ~~Winstock~~, now of Chicago, was the third, and I was the fourth, and now there is Rabbi Roy Rosenberg. It is fortunate that we have had wonderful and leading citizens in our lay group, and they not only have brought prestige to the temple, but have taken great pride in keeping the Temple (I would be immodest enough to say) the "prestige synagogue" of New Orleans. We have always been the largest synagogue,

DR. FEIBELMAN: and New Orleans is a strange community in the senseⁱⁿ that
(con'td.)

the Reform Jews in this city have always out numbered the Orthodox Jews. I do not believe that there is another city in the whole world that can say that. Incidentally, we have never had a kosher restaurant in New Orleans. There are places where you can buy kosher meats and things like that, and of course, all of the stores handle kosher products, but we have never had a kosher restaurant. There is another strange fact about New Orleans, and that is that this year when I received the Times-Picayune loving cup, they always publish a list of those who have received this cup since it began in 1901. There had been only one or two exceptions when the cup was not presented. There are, I would say, at least 65 recipients of this cup. I counted the number of Jews and discovered that 15 Jews had received this cup, which means that this is ~~about~~^{about} 25% of those recognized. This community has been recognizing Jews since the time of the yellow fever when Rabbi Gutheim belonged to the Howard's Society, which was a relief society, and that was both prior to and during the Civil War that he lived here and refused to take the oath of allegiance to the Union. It was said by Rabbi Heller that anti-semitism was practically stamped out as a result of his work in the relief of yellow fever here. Since that time there have been wonderful personalities who have contributed to the welfare of the whole community. Among these were the Stern family. Their son, Edgar Stern, married Julius Rosenwald's daughter, and the two together have established a great many institutions in this city. You will find that I listed these in the last pages of the article. Mr. Samuel Zemurray,

DR. FEIBELMAN: a poor boy, who started with one bunch of almost over-
(con'td.)

ripe bananas, became the banana king of both this country and Central America. He was a Rumanian Jew and a very fine man. He became head of the United Fruit Company and helped to build up many of these countries in the Indies. He left his memorial here as well as Harvard, which did the Sterns. We have had unusually wonderful ^{Jewish} doctors in New Orleans who have made ^{outstanding} contributions to helping make a medical center out of this city. Our people have been represented on the boards of Tulane University, and now they are on St. Mary Dominican's board, and, of course, Dillard University, the Negro University, which the Sterns have helped so very much. There was a time when the saying was that, with the exception of the D. H. Holmes Department Store, every store on Canal Street was owned by Jews. This was an exaggeration, but, of course, the Jews were very prominent in business in New Orleans always. The Maison Blanche Store, the Godchaux Store, the Porter Store were all Jewish-owned and have been through generations. I think the Godchaux store was started in 1840. These people were all peddlars when they first came to New Orleans. Now their children are all outstanding and prominent citizens helping in all ways and means. The Krauss Store started from scratch by Leon Heyman, and has built up not only a great foundation, but a very wonderful institution. Mr. Heyman's son is now president and runs the store.

DR. KALIN: Were many of these peddlars with their goods on their back?

DR. FEIBELMAN: The Godchaux family started as peddlars.

DR. KALIN: Could you spell that?

DR. FEIBELMAN: G-o-d-c-h-a-u-x. There are many variations of the spelling of the name Godchaux, but this is the established one in the city of New Orleans. We have had Jewish architects. We have had wonderful Jewish lawyers. The outstanding lawyer of the South during his mature years was Monte A. Lemann, who could have been a federal judge any time he wanted it, but did not give up his very outstanding practice. He was even mentioned as a Supreme Court Justice, but that never came through. Our lawyers, our doctors, our architects, our accountants, our businessmen, all were recognized on all boards, with the exception, I would say, of a few very exclusive carnival organizations. The Jews are an integrated group in the Christian community and socially share with them practically everything, *especially in the social and community agencies.* I have said for years that had it not been for Zemurray *and the* Sterns *ies* we would have had no opera, we would have had no symphony, the University *ies* would have suffered, we would have had no Tulane Lyseum, we would have had no Community Series. The community understands this, and even though these men are gone now, their families and children keep them up. The outstanding woman of the community is Mrs. Edgar Stern who keeps these benefits going *in* all directions, and now her gardens are open to the public and offered to the Garden Club of America, which is debating whether they can keep them or not because they would be so expensive to maintain. Something more that I want to say is that I have never quite understood why at the turn of the century, when so many people were coming into this country as immigrants, and Galveston, Texas, *was* one of the main ports of entry, that New Orleans, who received a great many of these, never seemed to maintain them as permanent residents. They evidently moved away. Oh, yes, a thing I wanted to mention a moment ago comes

DR. FEIBELMAN: back to me now. That in a metropolitan city the size of (con'td.)

New Orleans, approximately one million people, the population of the Jews has never been more than 1. plus percent. It has never reached 2 percent. I made a study of this in my doctoral thesis which is published by the University of Pennsylvania, and give a table to show the size of New Orleans relative to cities of a similar size throughout the country, should have 11. plus percent, but we have never had over 1. plus percent.

DR. KALIN: What was the title of your dissertaion?

DR. FEIBELMAN: A Social and Economic Study of the Jewish Community of New Orleans.

DR. KALIN: And first you were educated. . .

DR. FEIBELMAN: I was educated at Millsaps in Jackson, at the Hebrew Union, and at the University of Pennsylvania where I took two graduate degrees.

DR. KALIN: And you got your doctorate where?

DR. FEIBELMAN: At Penn.

DR. KALIN: At Penn.

DR. FEIBELMAN: I have two honorary degrees.

DR. KALIN: From where?

DR. FEIBELMAN: Millsaps gave me an honorary Doctor of Law, ¹⁹⁴⁶ and the Hebrew Union gave me a Doctor of Divinity, ¹⁹⁵⁶

DR. KALIN: Now, you did have some association with the man whom I am studying?

DR. FEIBELMAN: Dr. Fineshriber?

DR. KALIN: Dr. Fineshriber.

DR. FEIBELMAN: I had my first pulpit and went to Philadelphia in 1926.

Dr. Fineshriber had just been there two years. This was the largest congregation in the world at that time. It had over 1500 members, and it was ^{Rabbi} Joseph Krauskopf who had built it up to a phenomenal growth. My association with Dr. Fineshriber, as his assistant, was a very enlightening and beneficial one to me, and I learned a great deal from him. My fault was that I stayed too long.

DR. KALIN: You had your relationship from '26 to '36?

DR. FEIBELMAN: ^{In} '36. I came here to New Orleans and have been here ever since. Dr. Fineshriber was one of the most gifted men I have ever known. He had a felicity of speech that was simply remarkable. I frequently said that you could wake him out of sound sleep and ask him to speak on Einstein's Theory of Relativity, and he would charm you with what he had to say. He was personable, and, as I say, gifted and very well liked and admired. Of course, every man has some who ^{criticize} him, and he did not please everybody, ^{because} he was outspoken. I remember in the olden days when he used to crowd the Temple on Sunday morning, for we had Sunday morning services instead of late Friday evening services, with such lectures as ^{and O'Neill's "Strang Interlude"} Judge Ben Lindsay's "Companionate Marriage", ¹ in which at that time ^{were} sensations. He said to me one Sunday morning, "You see, they don't want to hear me. They just want to hear these topics." But, about the time I left the beginning of the wane of Sunday morning services was evident, and now ^{the} Temple has given them up and has changed to Friday night under its new rabbi.

DR. KALIN: Did he institute the Sunday morning services?

DR. FEIBELMAN: No, the temple had to be built for Dr. Krauskopf to take care of the crowds for Sunday morning lectures. You see, Dr. Krauskopf was an unusual voice in Philadelphia. In those days just at the turn of the century and into the 1920's we had no Sunday morning competing interests to attract people. Not even Atlantic City enticed people, because automobiles were still scarce. There was no radio. There were no outstanding Sunday morning newspapers. There were no golf clubs that attracted so many people. No sports. All of that has changed with the change of our times, but in those days, when Dr. Krauskopf and Dr. Fineshriber were at their height, people were glad to have something to do on Sunday morning, and there were no competing Saturday night enticements to keep them out late. Philadelphia was a notoriously dead city over the weekend, anyway. *Everyone* used to say that the people who could get out of town should go to New York over the weekend. But, the *T*emple was brought up to a very high pitch in the community, and Dr. Fineshriber maintained that until the competing interests just became a little too much. It was nothing for 1,000 members to come on Sunday morning, which is a good crowd in any audience, but before I left, this began to wane. It has gone out in most cities now, except, perhaps Pittsburgh and Chicago.

DR. KALIN: Did you have any difference in approach to the rabbinate?

DR. FEIBELMAN: The only difference that I would care to talk about was the fact that I was not a community figure in Philadelphia. He was the community figure. He represented the *T*emple at all of the luncheons and banquets and everything else, and on the boards. Naturally, the prominence in position came to him. That left me free to cultivate something that was more or less a part of my being, anyway, and that

DR. FEIBELMAN: was a pastoral rabbinate. I had more opportunity to get (con'td.)

to know the people and to serve them ~~than~~ he did. I once said to him that I thought it was foolish for us both to drive ourselves crazy covering the ~~distances~~ ~~in~~ calling and, particularly duplicaitng one another's visits to the hospital, and that he should take the list and pick out the ones he wanted and leave me the rest. He told me,

"It isn't important whether you call or not ~~to~~ It is important that I do it, and I came here to do it." Well, that ~~was~~ typical of him.

We had a very happy relationship up until about the last three years when we both realized that parting was necessary. But I would like to say that my years with him were very, very beneficial, and I learned a great deal from him. The only thing I didn't have during those ten years, which I missed terribly when I came to New Orleans, ~~was~~ that sense of responsibility which every rabbi ought to have. I certainly inherited a congregation which was at that time 500 members. It's about 900 today. I, frankly, was not prepared for the complete responsibility of a single rabbinate in a large, single congregation. I had to learn it.

DR. KALIN: Was he insensitive to criticism?

DR. FEIBELMAN: Dr. Fineshriber could not tolerate criticism. It upset him for weeks, and one of his first announcements from the pulpit, when he first came there, was that he did not want adverse criticism-- it only disturbed him and hurt him. "If you have anything good to say, say that. That helps me, but don't give me carping criticism." The people, as a result, remembered it. They did not criticize him to his face. I think it was a mistake, because he lived in a sort of fantasy world most of the time. He only heard the adulation of the

DR. FEIBELMAN: people, and I don't think this is helpful to a man. I
(con'td.)

think that it is good sometimes for us to know the adverse attitudes of people and I encourage that in the sense that it must be constructive. I don't want malicious criticism anymore than anybody else does, but constructive criticism, I think, for a man in public life is very necessary and helpful. He is bound to have to know what the other side thinks.

DR. KALIN: Did he usually speak extemporaneously about his text?

DR. FEIBELMAN: Dr. Fineshriber was not a very careful preparer of his talks and lectures, and particularly his addresses outside. I am sure that he thought about them, and I am sure that he developed them in his mind, but he did not write and he was gifted to such a degree that he could get up (as I mentioned a moment ago) out of a sound sleep and charm you. That spoiled him a great deal. Once I had to take over the pulpit for him when he was going to review Ludwig ~~Lewisohn's~~ book "Israel", and this was such a short notice that I asked him to give me some notes that he had. He frankly told me that he hadn't finished reading the book, and he didn't intend to. He ~~picked~~ out one chapter and discussed ~~what~~ he had read. Now, I don't want to be carping in my criticism of him now, especially since he died one year ago.

DR. KALIN: I had an interview with him one week before he died.

DR. FEIBELMAN: Oh, that's very interesting that you have an interview with him. As I say, his gifts, I think, spoiled him. He, unfortunately, had the reputation of not being a very careful student, and I don't think that he left anything permanent in writing for records at all,

DR. FEIBELMAN: as far as the general rabbinate is concerned. He would have (con'td.)

been interested at one time in succeeding Rabbi Kra'ss and going to Temple Emmanuel in New York, but the call did not come to him. He was not too popular in our conference, because he showed very little interest in it, and as a result did not bother too much about the friendships of younger men. This put him in the category with some other men who I think deserved the recognition from our conference, but he never got it. One of these was Jonah Wise, who was the son of the founder of the conference, Isaac M. Wise, but somehow they would never recognize Jonah Wise. They wouldn't recognize Louis Mann of Chicago. They wouldn't recognize *Emil* . Hirsch, who was certainly one of the towering early reformers of this country before Mann came to Sinai in Chicago. But our conference is that way and Fineshriber was one of the victims of it.

DR. KALIN: He was, of course, a founder of the American Council of Judaism. Did the repercussions of it and problems of this organization come to the Temple?

DR. FEIBELMAN: Here in New Orleans? Yes, there were considerable problems. I was away from Philadelphia by the time the Council was formed.

DR. KALIN: Was it formed in Philadelphia?

DR. FEIBELMAN: Yes, in Philadelphia and the two leading exponents in the rabbinate were the two Philadelphia rabbis, Rabbi *Wolsey* and Rabbi Fineshriber. I was sympathetic to the attitude, because I had never been a nationalist. I remained in the Council until the state of Israel was established, and I then said, "You don't argue with history." Then I got out. For years and years I begged these men and other

DR. FEIBELMAN: interested Councillites to get a positive program and not always (con'td.)

denounce Zionism. I said, "You have a great task to perform in this country by bringing the Jews back into the synagogue, instead of *Shunting* them off into all kinds of *Anti* Zionist activities." But they wouldn't listen to me, and now the old guard has gone and even the Executive Director has been dismissed. But in New Orleans I always made my position clear from my pulpit and in my bulletin as to where I stood. They knew I was a member of the Council. I was the editor of the Jewish paper in New Orleans for a few years--The Jewish Ledger.

DR. KALIN: Is it still *published?*

DR. FEIBELMAN: No. They came to me once. *to ask me to edit the paper.*

DR. KALIN: What year was it?

DR. FEIBELMAN: Oh, about four or *1940 or 1941*. It started in 1896.

DR. KALIN: Are there any extant copies?

DR. FEIBELMAN: They've all been sent to Cincinnati.

DR. KALIN: I see.

DR. FEIBELMAN: I saw to it that the Archives got them all--the whole file.

DR. KALIN: I have used some microfilming, and I thought about that.

DR. FEIBELMAN: We had a few crises in our congregation about the Council, and we even lost one or two members, but we lost a member also when we had Ralph Bunche come here to talk. Rabbis have to face that. I was never dogmatic in thinking that everybody had to agree with me, but I did think that on the question of integration and the question of Zionism they should know where I stood. I suppose it was because of my upbringing in Jackson, Mississippi where I had no knowledge of the *pogroms*, *or* condition of suffering in Europe. My folks

DR. FEIBELMAN: all came from Germany and I had no Orthodox training. I (con'td.)

had no training in Hebrew in Jackson, actually. So, I ^{conveniently was} ~~oriented~~ ^{of my background}, I suppose, to America, and I am very proud ^{and can't help} it, that I ^{was born here and} live here.

DR. KALIN: Now, usually in the South, traditionally, the congregation has dominated the pastor. Obviously, in your case, you have led your congregation.

DR. FEIBELMAN: Well, I didn't completely lead it. I was fortunate in the sense that most of my leaders in the congregation shared my views. Although we had ^{a few} ~~men~~ on the boards who were staunchly Zionist, I would say that the majority of our people have always been that old German stock which was not dedicated to Palestine or Zionism as so many of the Eastern Jews were. This is an old community. They have been here many generations.

DR. KALIN: Were there many spurts in the Jewish migration? I mean, did a great many Jews come over here, say, in the 1840's?

DR. FEIBELMAN: They came, but, you see, there had been Jews in New Orleans since the founding. You will find that in my paper, ^{the sources} I got from Dr. Korn who is now the Rabbi of the Keneseth Israel Temple in Philadelphia. We had no big waves of immigration, ~~but~~ we've always had immigration in this community. I mentioned in my thesis that there is an old Jewish cemetery on Canal Street that was the Portuguese-Jewish Cemetery. The names are not all together this way, but ~~the majority~~ of them are Spanish-Portuguese names. ^B Because of intermarriage the Portuguese community, virtually, went out completely. Now, we have remnants of maybe three or four families left in New Orleans today.

DR. FEIBELMAN: If it had not been for German ^{and French Jewish} immigration there would be
(con'td.)

no Jewish community, for ~~these~~ established themselves

securely. Incidentally, the first congregation in New Orleans was a
German-Jewish congregation in 1828, I believe.

DR. KALIN: Do you know the name of that?

DR. FEIBELMAN: ~~Shangai Chassed~~ ^{(Gates of Mercy) Congregation} It is now Touro Synagogue. As I mentioned,

the heavy immigration around the turn of the century did not hit

New Orleans like it hit the other big cities in the East, and I can't
account for that.

DR. KALIN: Thank you very much.

DR. FEIBELMAN: If there is anything further that you want me to fill in on,
then just get in touch with me.

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